The guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have directed private and public institutions to provide access for all people. The ADA prohibits discrimination in employment, public services, public accommodations, and communications by a public entity on the basis of an individual’s disability. Public gardens throughout the United States must evaluate the accessibility to individuals with disabilities of their programs and facilities and determine their compliance level with Title II of the ADA [U.S. Dept. of Justice (USDJ), 1992].

Purdue University Horticulture Gardens (PUHG) qualifies under Title II because it is state-funded. The purpose of this study was to assess PUHG’s current level of ADA compliance and make recommendations for improving accessibility and outreach to individuals with disabilities. These results can serve as a model for other public gardens. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (1993), there are nearly 49 million Americans with disabilities. Population estimates suggest that there are 500,000 people in Indiana with disabilities (Indiana Governor’s Planning Council, 1990). The American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta (1993) estimated that American public gardens received about 50 million visitors in 1992, but it is unknown how many visitors had disabilities or how many potential visitors with disabilities have not visited a public garden due to limited accessibility.
Publicly and privately owned public gardens are implementing changes to improve accessibility. Some public gardens are modifying their facilities. For example, the Arnold Arboretum redesigned the main entrance of its visitors’ center, located in a century old historic building, by installing wider doors, a ramp, and new landscaping (Cook, 1993). To implement programmatic changes, the Denver Botanic Garden redesigned its tours and brochures to accommodate visitors with hearing or visual impairments and trained its staff in disability awareness (Hailer, 1993). Some public gardens perceive the ADA as ‘a welcoming mat for all visitors’ (Briggs, 1993; Cook, 1993; Hailer, 1993; Ostenson, 1993). Preliminary feedback suggests that individuals with disabilities welcome changes that public gardens make in their programs or facilities.

Public gardens that evaluate the accessibility of their programs and facilities have an opportunity to be proactive in working with a previously underserved clientele. Public gardens can increase the visibility of their programs and facilities to individuals with disabilities by disseminating information to them and to staff members and the public, potentially increasing their numbers of visitors and memberships. To date, there has been no nationwide or Indiana state survey on the accessibility of public gardens. However, some public gardens have evaluated the accessibility of their programs (Briggs, 1993; Cook, 1993; Hailer, 1993; Ostenson, 1993).

Definition of terms

The following definitions apply to terms used throughout this report (USDJ, 1992).

Accessibility. This report focuses on two types: physical or facility accessibility, a structure that is readily usable by individuals with physical or differing abilities; and program accessibility, a program, activity, or service, viewed from a whole, that is readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities.

Disability. A disability is a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual.

Legislation before the ADA

Federal legislation before the ADA established program and physical accessibility standards applicable to public gardens. The Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 established physical accessibility by requiring public entities receiving federal financial assistance to make their facilities accessible to individuals with disabilities [United States Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (USATBCB), 1981]. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibited discrimination against disabled individuals on the basis on their disability and required evaluation of federally funded programs and facilities (USDJ, 1992). Under this act, federally funded parks and recreation areas, museums, zoos, and historical places were required to survey the accessibility of their programs and facilities (Majewski, 1987).

In 1984, the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards (UFAS) were adopted by federal agencies for accessibility of newly constructed federal facilities (USATBCB, 1992). In 1990, the United States Forest Service (USFS) and National Park Service (NPS) published guidelines for programs and services of parks and recreation facilities in an interim draft of the Design Guide for Accessible Outdoor Recreation, which was revised and published [U.S. Dept. of Agriculture (USDA) and U.S. Department of the Interior (USDI), 1990, 1993]. The Design Guide for Universal Access to Outdoor Recreation is based on accessibility guidelines issued under the ADA [ADA accessibility guidelines (ADAAAGs)], but publishing them is pending establishment of national standards as a part of the ADA.

Applying the ADA to public gardens

Under Title III, the ADA loosely defines privately owned public gardens in one of 12 categories as places of public display or collection, such as parks, museums, or zoos (USDJ, 1992). Publicly and privately owned public gardens are subject to different titles of the ADA, but the process of assessing garden accessibility is similar. For most public gardens, portions of the ADA concerning program and facility accessibility did not take effect until January 1992. Physical changes to a facility had to be made as expeditiously as possible, but no later than January 1995 (USDJ, 1992). New buildings constructed or designed for public gardens after January 1992 must be accessible.

Public entities such as publicly owned public gardens must choose to implement UFAS guidelines, ADAAAGs, or local or state codes. The most stringent applicable code must be used as the standard for barrier removal, but compliance is determined case by case (USATBCB, 1992; USDJ, 1992). It is anticipated that UFAS guidelines eventually will be eliminated (USDJ, 1993). Although the ADA is a landmark in civil rights legislation, it does not provide finding to achieve program or facility accessibility (USDJ, 1992).

There are three methods for achieving accessibility for publicly owned public gardens: a) barrier removal in existing programs...